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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a multifaceted approach for investigating the impact of the Success for All (SFA) program on children's reading proficiency. The approach advocated features case study research and uses document analysis, structured observation, interviews, and questionnaires to collect data. The research design was successfully field tested in two Mississippi elementary schools, one in a rural community and one in a university community. Strategies presented in this paper can be used by experienced or novice researchers to study the SFA reading program in an elementary school. Student and teacher questionnaires are attached. (Author/SLD)

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INVESTIGATING THE SUCCESS FOR ALL READING PROGRAM

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Abstract: This paper presents a multi-faceted approach for investigating the impact of the Success For All program on children's reading proficiency. The approach advocated in the paper features case study research and uses document analysis, structured observation, interviews, and questionnaires to collect data. The research design was successfully field-tested in two Mississippi elementary schools--one located in a rural community and one located in a university community. Strategies presented in this paper can be used by either experienced or novice researchers to study the SFA reading program in an elementary school.

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Touted as a marketed solution for addressing children's low reading performance, Success for All (SFA), developed by Dr. Robert Slavin an his associates at Johns Hopkins University, is one of the leading packaged reading programs on the national market. Although its developers originally designed the program to benefit students who rank in the lowest 25% in reading achievement, it's presently being adopted and used in elementary schools throughout the United States as a complete reading curriculum for all students in kindergarten through grade six (Slavin, 1998).

Does SFA produce children who learn to read and then become readers who read for pleasure? Unfortunately, results are mixed. Although the program appears to increase children's reading achievement as narrowly measured by standardized tests, it's uncertain whether the program produces children who become proficient learners because they love to read. Very little comprehensive research concerning SFA has been conducted to date (Blendinger & Wells, 2000).

This paper presents a multi-faceted approach, featureing case study research, for investigating the impact of the SFA program on children's reading proficiency. Document analysis, structured observation, interviews, and questionnaires are used to collect data. Our research design we developed was successfully field-tested in two Mississippi elementary schools--one located in a rural community and one located in a university community. The design can be used by either experienced or novice researchers to study the SFA reading program in action (Wells, 2000).

Case Study Research

We believe case study research provides one of the best approaches available for comprehensively investigating the impact of the SFA reading program in an elementary school using a variety of measures ranging from standardized test scores to parent attitudes. According to Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), a case study is done to

shed light on a phenomenon, which is the processes, activities, or persons of interest to the researcher. A case is a particular instance of the phenomenon.

In a case study, a substantial amount of data can be collected about the specific case (or cases) selected to represent the phenomenon. These data can be in the form of words, images, or artifacts. Case study research involves watching people in their own territory and interacting with them in their own language, on their own terms. Quantitative data may be collected as well qualitative data. Often data are collected over an extended time period using several methods of collection.

Case study research typically involves fieldwork in which the researcher interacts participants studied in their own natural settings. Researchers generally do case studies for one of three purposes: (a) to produce detailed descriptions of a phenomenon, (b) to develop possible explanations of the phenomenon, or (c) to evaluate the phenomenon.

In a case study whose major purpose is description, the researcher attempts to depict a phenomenon and conceptualize it. A good depiction provides what is commonly referred to as thick description of the phenomenon: that is, statements that recreate a situation and as much of its context as possible, accompanied by the meanings and intentions inherent in that situation. Researchers add depth to their descriptions by searching for the presence of themes: the salient, characteristic features of a case.

Often the major purpose of case study research is to provide explanations for the phenomenon studied. Explanations may be seen as patterns, meaning that one type of variation observed in a case study is systematically related to another observed variation. If the researcher does not claim that one variation has a causal effect on the other, it's described as a relational pattern. If causality is claimed, it's a causal pattern.

Evaluation of the phenomenon investigated can also be the major purpose of case study research. If making judgments is the chief reason, the researcher should

create a thick description of the phenomenon being evaluated and identify salient constructs, themes, and patterns. Case studies whose purpose is evaluation are being done with increasing frequency.

In using case study research to investigate the SFA reading program, we suggest that the researcher address all three purposes: description, explanation, and evaluation. In addition, the researcher should develop a succinct demographic profile of the school studied. An excerpt from one our SFA case studies showing what we mean by "demographic profile" follows:

> The elementary school located in the rural community enrolled approximately 600 students in kindergarten through grade six during the 1998-99 school year. The school is named Alpha Elementary School in this study for purposes of anonymity. The school district in which the school is located serves a student population that is 84 percent African-American and 16 percent White. Seventy-five percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunches and 14 percent are identified for special education services. The district does not offer any advanced placement courses and has a 73 percent graduation rate. The total per pupil expenditure is $4,421 (Wells, 2000).

The forthcoming sections of the paper focus attention on how document analysis, structured observation, interviews, and questionnaires can be used to investigate the impact of the SFA program on children's reading proficiency.

Document Analysis and Field Observation

In investigating the impact SFA has on children's reading proficiency, we suggest that the researcher starts by examining written documents such as the program's prospectus. Manning and Cullum-Swan (1994) state that to fully understand a document or record, the researcher should study the context in which it was produced: the author's purpose in writing it, working conditions, and audience. SFA documents indicate the following:

> Prescriptive curriculum should be closely followed to teach reading.
> Reading is taught in a 90-minute block every morning.
> Reading instruction is supervised and coordinated by a facilitator.
> Cross-grade ability grouping is used for instruction.
> Children are placed homogeneously across grade levels.

Children of similar ability are taught in a whole-class setting.
Children are assessed and regrouped as necessary.
Tutoring is provided children who need extra assistance.
Parents are involved in their children's reading.
Family support team should be an integral part of the program.

We used the above-mentioned information as a framework to guide our observations and then recorded what we observed in the form of field notes. According to Yin (1984), field notes are best made using "continuous recording" techniques. Continuous recording involves scripting all the behavior of the targeted setting and subjects for a specific observation interval. To determine whether SFA procedures for implementation are being followed as advocated by the program's developers, we recommend making at least 10-15 hours of field observation.

School and classroom records should be examined to collect data for framework components that may be difficult to observe, such as parent involvement or family support team activity. Document analysis also provides the means for investigating how SFA affects children's reading scores on standardized tests (e.g., Iowa Tests of Basic Skill) in terms of normal curve equivalency (NCE) scores. NCEs are equal-interval scores, derived from national percentile ranks, that result from dividing the normal curve into 99 equal units. NCEs are units of measurement used in many southeastern states to assess student achievement for accreditation purposes. Standardized test scores pertaining to reading achievement are usually available for most elementary schools. Test scores for student cohorts (i.e., the same group of students as they precede through the various grade levels comprising the school) should be compared for two or more years.

Key Informant Interviews

To investigate what key informants report about the impact the reading program is making, we recommend conducting semi-structured interviews with the principal and the SFA facilitator. The "key informant" approach involves interviewing individuals

who have special knowledge of the situation. Semi-structured interviewing requires asking a series of structured (closed-form) questions and then exploring the key informants' responses more extensively using more open follow-up questions to obtain additional information (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

Sample questions that can be used to guide the interview with the principal are as follows:

1. What were some of the problems encountered when SFA was initially implemented?
2. How is the program funded? What is the approximate cost per pupil for full implementation of SFA?
3. Does every certified teacher teach reading?
4. How would you describe what goes on during the 90-minute reading period?
5. How many certified teachers provide one-on-one tutoring to children experiencing difficulty? How many children are tutored?
6. Do tutors work with the students they are tutoring on lessons they have been previously taught so that the material is familiar to them?
7. How are special education students involved in the SFA program? Has there been a reduction in special education placements since implementing SFA?
8. How are parents involved in the program?
9. Do students participate in reading celebrations? What are they like?
10. What are the classroom libraries that are part of the SFA package like?
11. What testing measures do you use to chart students' gains?
12. What is the percentage of student movement at eight-week testing periods?
13. How does SFA mesh with the state's reading and language arts curriculum framework?
14. Is the writing component part of your program? How does it work?
15. How does SFA's home reading component function?
16. How does the family support team and the family advisory board work?

17. Do you have volunteer listeners?

18. How does SFA's staff development component function? What problems have you encountered?

19. How often do SFA officials visit? How else is the program monitored?

Sample questions that can be used to guide the interview with the SFA facilitator are as follows:

1. What are your responsibilities as facilitator of the SFA reading program?

2. What goes on during the 90-minute reading period?

3. How many certified teachers provide one-on-one tutoring to children experiencing difficulty? What is the average number of children receiving tutoring?

4. Do tutors work with the students they are tutoring on lessons they have been previously taught so that the material is familiar to them?

5. How are special education students involved in the SFA program? Has there been a reduction in special education placements since implementing SFA?

6. How are parents involved in the program?

7. Do students participate in reading celebrations? What are they like?

8. What are the classroom libraries that are part of the SFA package like?

9. What testing measures do you use to chart students' gains?

10. What percentage of student movement is there at eight-week testing periods?

11. How does SFA mesh with the state's curriculum framework for reading and language arts?

12. Is the writing component part of your program? How does it work?

13. How does SFA's home reading component function?

14. How does the family support team and the family advisory board work?

15. Do you have volunteer listeners?

16. How does SFA's staff development component function? What problems have you encountered?

17. How often do SFA officials visit? How else is the program monitored?

18. What is the break down of students by reading proficiency levels? What percentage of your student population is reading at or above grade level?

19. How does the grading system used for the SFA program work?

Data collected from interviews with the principals and reading facilitators at the two school or schools comprising the case should be analyzed for the purpose of identifying emerging themes. Verbatim responses to the interviews need to be edited and summarized for readability. Care also must be exercised to not change or distort content.

Surveying Attitudes

Questionnaires should be used to survey the attitudes of teachers, students, and parents toward the SFA reading program in particular and reading in general. We recommend the following procedures for measuring the attitudes of teachers, students, and parents involved in the case:

1. Researcher directly administers the questionnaires developed for teachers at a brief meeting before or after school. The primary purposes of the teacher instrument are (a) to collect demographic information about personal characteristics of the respondents in order to establish a teacher profile, and (b) to measure attitudes about their involvement in the SFA reading program. A copy of the teacher questionnaire we designed accompanies this paper.

2. Teachers administer the questionnaires developed for students to the students in their classrooms in a whole group setting at an unobtrusive time, such as just before the school day ends. The primary purposes of the student instrument is to measure their attitudes about (a) the SFA reading program in particular, and (b) reading in general. Copies of the two student questionnaires (one for K-2 students and one for students in grades 3-6) we designed accompany this paper.

3. Teachers send the parent questionnaire developed for parents home with students and collect them the next day. The primary purposes of this instrument are: (a) to collect demographic information about personal characteristics of the respondents in order to establish a parent profile, (b) to measure parents' attitudes about their children's involvement in the SFA reading program in particular, and (c) to measure parents' attitudes about their children's reading habits in general. A copy of the parent questionnaire we designed accompanies this paper.

Prior to administering the questionnaires, information concerning the purpose of the study should be given to each participating teacher. Letters of assent for participation of minors, as well as consent forms for parent participation, can be sent home with the students. Teachers and parents need to be informed when and how to return the forms and questionnaires. Care must be taken to ensure participants that their participation in the survey process is voluntary.

Scales for measuring attitudes vary according to the items on the instruments. Some items are measured using two-point scales, other items are measured using three-point scales, and still other items are measured using five-point scales. Open-ended questions are also part of the instruments.

We recommend tabulating and describing responses to the instruments' questions and statements in terms of frequencies (i.e., number of respondents selecting a specific response) and percents. In addition to descriptive measures, chi-square "goodness of-fit" tests may be used to determine whether the frequency distribution shows a specific pattern. Although observed frequencies will almost always differ somewhat from expected frequencies, chi-square tests can determine whether the differences are statistically significant or due to chance. An alpha level of .01 should be selected to determine statistical significance (Bluman, 1997).

Responses to the instruments' open-ended questions asking respondents to state their opinions about the positive and negative aspects of the SFA reading program should be analyzed for the purpose of identifying emerging themes. Themes (i.e., grouping data in terms of categories) represent recurring regularities in the data.

Closing Remarks

This paper presented a multi-faceted approach for investigating the impact of the SFA program on children's reading proficiency. In closing, it should be noted that the research design was developed based on the two Mississippi elementary schools

comprising the case studied: a school located in a rural community and a school located in a university community.

There is need for continuing case study research investigating SFA's long-term impact on children's reading achievement and habits, such as reading for pleasure. Much more comprehensive research must be conducted to determine whether the SFA reading program produces children who enjoy reading and is worth the costs incurred.

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TEACHER ATTITUDES TOWARD THE SUCCESS FOR ALL READING PROGRAM

The purpose of this brief questionnaire is to collect information concerning teacher attitudes toward the Success For All (SFA) reading program. Your participation is much appreciated.

Indicate your answer for each question by checking the appropriate space.

Year of teaching experience
- ___ 0-5
- ___ 6-10
- ___ 11-15
- ___ 16-20
- ___ 21-25
- ___ more than 25

Race
- ___ African American
- ___ American Indian
- ___ Asian
- ___ Hispanic
- ___ White
- ___ Other

Years of experience teaching reading
- ___ 0-5
- ___ 6-10
- ___ 11-15
- ___ 16-20
- ___ 21-25
- ___ more than 25

Dominant method of reading instruction prior to implementing SFA
- ___ Basal series
- ___ Language experience
- ___ Literature-based
- ___ Trade books
- ___ Other

Check the appropriate responses.

yes	no	
___	___	I had the opportunity to observe the SFA program in other schools.
___	___	The administration provided me with adequate information about the SFA program.
___	___	I had sufficient time to study the program prior to making a decision about adopting SFA.
___	___	I voted to implement the SFA program at my school.

Indicate your agreement with each of the following statements by checking the appropriate response.

	strongly agree	agree	uncertain	disagree	strongly disagree
I received adequate training to teach SFA reading prior to its implementation.	___	___	___	___	___
Follow-up training has been helpful.	___	___	___	___	___
Support from the administration and the program facilitator is helpful.	___	___	___	___	___
Children's attitudes about reading have improved.	___	___	___	___	___
I have access to all the resources I need to implement the SFA program.	___	___	___	___	___
I have an adequate classroom library stocked with books that match the students' reading levels.	___	___	___	___	___
Students frequently check out books from my classroom library.	___	___	___	___	___
Parents are involved in their children's reading.	12	___	___	___	___

Check the components of the SFA reading program that are implemented at your school.

yes	no	uncertain	
____	____	____	90-minute reading program
____	____	____	Children are grouped by reading performance ability.
____	____	____	Reading class size does not exceed 20 students.
____	____	____	One-on-one tutoring is conducted by certified teachers.
____	____	____	Reading class begins by sharing engaging literature with the children.
____	____	____	All students are tested at the end of each 8-week period.
____	____	____	Reading materials are organized by support staff.

Do you prefer teaching reading using the SFA approach compared to other methods you have used in the past? Please comment on your answer.

What are some aspects of the SFA program that you especially like?

What are some aspects of the SFA program that you dislike or would like to change?

PARENT ATTITUDES TOWARD THE SUCCESS FOR ALL READING PROGRAM

The purpose of this brief questionnaire is to collect information concerning what parents think about the Success For All (SFA) reading program and their children's reading in general. Your participation is much appreciated.

Indicate your answer for each item by checking the appropriate space.

Age
___ 20-24
___ 25-29
___ 30-34
___ 35-39
___ 40-44
___ 45-49
___ 50 or above

Gender
___ Male
___ Female

Race
___ African American
___ American Indian
___ Asian
___ Hispanic
___ White
___ Other

Education
___ High School or GED
___ Some college
___ College degree
___ Higher degree
___ Other

Indicate your agreement with each of the following statements by checking the appropriate response.

	strongly agree	agree	uncertain	disagree	strongly disagree
1. The school administration informed the parents about the Success for All program when it was initiated during the 1997-1998 school year.	___	___	___	___	___
2. I understand the main aspects of the SFA program.	___	___	___	___	___
3. I know what level my child has reached in reading.	___	___	___	___	___
4. The school sends me information about my child's reading progress on a regular basis.	___	___	___	___	___
5. My child's attitude about reading has improved since the SFA program was initiated.	___	___	___	___	___
6. I like the idea of the uninterrupted 90-minute reading period at the beginning of the school day.	___	___	___	___	___
7. I like the cross-age grouping for the reading period.	___	___	___	___	___
8. My child receives one-on-one tutoring by a certified teacher.	___	___	___	___	___
9. I read regularly to my child at home.	___	___	___	___	___
10. My child reads at home every day.	___	___	___	___	___

What are some aspects of the SFA program that you especially like?

What are some aspects of the SFA program that you dislike or would like to change?

STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARD READING

We would like to know your thinking about reading and books. Your participation is much appreciated.

Put a check in front of the correct answer.

_____ Girl
_____ Boy

_____ Kindergarten
_____ First
_____ Second

Color the face that shows how you feel about each statement.

1. I like having reading to start the school day.

2. I read with my partner every day at school.

3. I like to write stories.

4. I like the little books I take home to read to my family.

5. My school has lots of other good books that I can take home to read.

6. Sometimes a tutor helps just me learn to read.

7. I like to read.

8. I like to tell the whole class about the books I read.

Thank you for your help!

STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARD READING

We would like to know your thinking about reading and books. Your participation is much appreciated.

Put a check in front of the correct answer.

Grade:	Gender:	Race:
_____ Third	_____ Girl	_____ African American
_____ Fourth	_____ Boy	_____ American Indian
_____ Fifth		_____ Asian
_____ Sixth		_____ Hispanic
		_____ White
		_____ Other

Check the answer that shows how you feel about the statement.

yes	no	don't know	
___	___	___	1. I like having reading to start the school day.
___	___	___	2. I like being with a different group of students for reading.
___	___	___	3. I read at home everyday.
___	___	___	4. My school has lots of good books that I can take home to read.
___	___	___	5. Reading is my favorite subject.
___	___	___	6. I do a lot of creative writing at school with my cooperative group.
___	___	___	7. I like to tell the whole class about the books I have read.
___	___	___	8. Success for All has improved my reading ability.

Thank you for your help!

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